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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 6560
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3171
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA PRIORITY 0271
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 4706
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2384
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 3615
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 000744

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [NP](#) [SOCI](#)

SUBJECT: NEPAL: INDIGENOUS GROUPS VIE FOR POWER, FEDERALISM

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Classified By: Charges d'Affaires Jeffrey Moon a.i. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Nepal's ethnic minority ("Janajati") groups have formed a political caucus in the Constituent Assembly (CA) to overcome their traditional marginalization in Nepali politics. The Janajati groups propose a federal system with distinct districts for different groups, but disagree on numbers of districts and their boundaries. Maoist promises to act on Janajati concerns were unfilled when the Maoists were in power. End Summary

¶2. (C) Charge hosted a lunch for four senior Janajati leaders to discuss indigenous concerns and ideas on federalism. In attendance were: Pasang Sherpa, CA Member & Chairman of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN); Padma Ratna Tuladhar, Human Rights Activist & former Minister of Health and Labor; Raj Kumar Lekhi, General Secretary, Tharu Welfare Council; and Parshuram Tamang, Chairman of the Tamsaling Nepal Rastriya Party.

Who Are the Janajati?

¶3. (U) The Janajati of Nepal are indigenous ethnic groups, with distinct languages and cultures. In 2002 Nepal enacted the National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities Act, officially identifying 59 Janajati ethnic groups. The Janajati are spread throughout the country and comprise approximately 40 percent of the population in Nepal. They have been oppressed and marginalized historically but in the early 1990s the Maoists began advocating for Janajati rights and effectively used that advocacy to gain widespread grass-roots support for the insurgency at a time their success was waning.

Federalism: E Pluribus Unum, Nepali Style

¶4. (C) Janajati leaders stressed their main concern at this juncture is how federalism will be structured in the new constitution. The Tamsaling Nepal Rastriya Party would like to see Nepal divided into 6 federal states and NEFIN envisages 13 federal states. Ethnic groups disagree on boundaries for creating federal districts but they agree the states must be based on ethnicity, language, and territory. Official languages are also a key component of the federalism

debate. Padma Tuladhar, the Janajati activist and former minister, is proposing 10 national languages, 13 provincial languages and 2 (English & Hindi) international languages that would form the basis of a new, united Nepal.

Indigenous Caucus Pressing Ethnic Concerns

¶5. (C) In late July, Janajati leaders in the CA formed a caucus to push for indigenous rights and frame the debate on federalism. Of the 601 CA members, 219 self-identified Janajati members caucused together. Thus far, 155 of the 219 have signed a concept paper that includes ideas for possible inclusion into the new constitution. High ranking party members from all major parties have joined the caucus. None of the lunch participants thought the caucus members would form a potential voting block--they saw the roll as an advisory group within the CA.

Maoist Campaign Promises Vanish Into Nepal's Thin Air

¶6. (C) Padma Tuladhar told charge that the Maoists are currently facing a "crisis of confidence" and noted that, had they made more progress when they were in control of the government, they would have engendered more popular support amongst the Nepali populace. Tuladhar and the other Janajati leaders pointed out that the Maoists were quick to take up their cause but slow to push for any change once in power. Tuladhar said when they needed popular support leaders of Nepal's major political parties, including the Maoists, all hail from the ruling Brahman class and thus have perpetuated the centuries old tradition of classist, minority rule. The rank and file Maoist cadres however are more sympathetic to actually promoting ethnic issues.

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¶7. (C) Pasang Sherpa, the CA member, said the UML was somewhat sympathetic to the Janajati cause while the Nepali Congress (NC) thought that strengthening ethnic rights would lead to the break up of Nepal. Tamang, of the Nepal Rastriya Party, chalked the Maoist interest in ethnic affairs up to nothing but politics. "The Maoists come to us whenever they need support, they came last Tuesday, but then they don't deliver on their promises," he said. Tuladhar joked about the ephemeral nature of Maoist support. He observed that although the Janajati comprise approximately 40 percent of the population, when the Maoists conducted a nationwide survey, all of their documents and material were exclusively in Nepali. None of the survey materials were in ethnic, regional, or minority languages.

Comment

¶8. (C) Janajati groups have been politically active in Nepal since the 1950's, but remain marginalized in a system that values political party affiliation above ethnic background. Janajati groups have legitimate concerns that their disenfranchisement will continue in a new constitution. The formation of a Janajati caucus to publicize their cause reflects an ongoing determination to translate ethnic concerns into a political power base. There is no indication, however, that Maoist or UML support for Janajati votes exists beyond what is required for political expediency.

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